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PRIMARY RESEARCH

Combined Effects of Brand Co-Creation, Customization on Brand Trust and Word-of-Mouth: Mediating Role of Perceived Brand authenticity and Moderating Role of Need for Uniqueness A study from Islamic Perspective

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Abstract. The concept of authenticity in brands is the call of hour. Despite the recent attempts towards conceptualization of Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA), researchers seem unwilling to study the predecessors and impact of PBA on other variables and constructs in marketing research. In this regard, Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, and Grohmann (2015) called for research on the antecedents and consequences of PBA. Researchers may study customization and co-creation engagement in relation to the PBA (Fritz, Schoenmueller, & Bruhn, 2017; Morhart et al., 2015). This study is relational/ causal study. It is based on the responses of variables within the natural settings of the respondents. The survey questionnaire is filled by customers using different brands and is part of brand fan pages. Study collected data from 200 customers using branded products through online survey. From Islamic perspective, results of the study are completely aligned with the teachings of Islam in terms of which one should not spread news that has no proof. The study suggests that the participants of customization and co-creation process have the proof and evidence to speak truth regarding a brand/product. This study provides useful implication for researchers and managers; it fills the theoretical gap, and urges managers for co-creation and customization.

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JEL Classification: M31, M37, M39, Z12

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INTRODUCTION

The research and development process of the companies are now influenced more by the consumers through co-creation by designing and managing an effective communication channel with consumers, (Semane et al., 2010). Unlike the past, the customers and companies are now working as partners, co-designers and co-creators in the innovative practices of companies. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) conceptualized this advancement as "co-creation: the procedure in which the both sides efficiently connect, learn, share data and

combine assets together to create value". Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013) noted that if consumers were part of the creation of the product, the attitude of consumers towards a product would be more positive. If the company is inclined to empower the consumers, non-participative consumers will also have positive intentions towards their product (Fuchs & Schreier, 2011).

Functional variances among brands are turning out to be of little importance; consequently, the significance of 'soft' and emotional aspects like brand personality are being acknowledged by the marketers and researchers (Demirbag, Yurt, Guneri, & Kurtulus, 2010). To be authentic, Holt (2002) states that "brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value" (p. 83).

An ever increasing number of companies are offering consumers the possibility to customize their products, exactly as the customer wants. Enabling customers to personalize their goods at the moment of purchase builds feelings of ownership and product loyalty. However, despite the importance of a customized product as a vehicle to embed one's self-concept, research on factors related to a consumer's motivation to represent his/her identity into the customized product is scarce (Atakan, Bagozzi, & Yoon, 2014). Consumers attempt to signal their sense of 'self' through product consumption (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). Levy (1959) rst noted symbolic meaning in consumption in which people buy products not only for "what they can do, but also for what they mean" (p.118). In this context, customization is viewed as a means of integrating important aspect of the consumer psychological needs into the products, beyond simply increasing preference fit.

Initial attempt towards conceptualization and operationalization of brand authenticity was made by Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, and Farrelly (2014). Napoli et al. (2014) defined brand authenticity as "a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers" (p.2). They further argued that the concept of brand authenticity is multi-dimensional and includes perception of heritage, nostalgia, symbolism, sincerity, craftsmanship, quality commitment and design consistency.

Consumers' requirement for uniqueness is grounded in uniqueness hypothesis (Fromkin & Snyder, 1980), which shows itself in the persons' quest for material merchandise to separate themselves from others (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Customers' requirement for uniqueness is exhibited in three sorts of buyer conduct: innovative decision counter-congruity; disliked decision counter-similarity; and evasion of comparability.

Blackshaw (2008) discusses authenticity attributions as influencing factors on a brand's credibility. This finds support by the investigation of Napoli et al. (2014) who demonstrate a positive correlation between brand authenticity and its credibility perception as well as brand trust. Furthermore, Morhart et al. (2015) verify an influencing effect of brand authenticity on emotional brand attachment. The relevance of authenticity for emotional bonds finds further support within the psychology literature, where authenticity is discussed as major determinant of relationship well-being and commitment (Wickham, 2013). The behavioral consequences of brand authenticity, brand loyalty (Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015), pur-

chase intention (Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015; Napoli et al., 2014) and the intention to recommend the brand (Morhart et al., 2015; Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012) have been analyzed.

Although it is recognized that co-creation/interactive experience can produce engagement (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010), yet, there are many instances which show that the interactive experiences of co-creation tasks do not always produce consumer engagement and foster brand relationships (Gebauer, Füller, & Pezzei, 2013). Hence, the mixed findings require clearer understanding. While many studies have examined co-creation, these studies have focused on the managerial effects of co-creation, such as economic gain (Ostrom, 2010; Zhao & Calantone, 2003), with little attention on the brand relationships building during the co-creation process. As mentioned above, little work has been done on examination of antecedents and consequences of PBA. Researchers have called for further research on the antecedents and consequences of PBA (e.g., see Fritz et al., 2017; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte, & Beverland, 2016; Oishi et al., 2009). Morhart et al. (2015) also proposed that future researchers may study customization and co-creation engagement in relation to the PBA.

In the light of above cited literature there seems to be a need to explore the combined effect of co-creation, customization on psychological outcomes with mediating role of PBA and moderating role of need for uniqueness. Thereby, it provides an important contribution and augments our understanding on brand co-creation and customization. It extends the literature by revealing the crucial psychological causes of brand co-creation engagement. Also, this study advances the understanding of the co-creation effects on psychological outcomes.

The Self-concept theory (Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, & Jordaan, 1963), along with self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986) acts as an overarching theory in this study, as it provides the basis to examine individuals' ability and desire to "know thy self" and expand it by inclusion of others i.e., people, objects etc.

Self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986) indicates that individuals have an inalienable inspiration to fuse others (in our specific situation, brands) into their self-idea. In any case, such a fuse of a brand into the self may rely upon the apparent level of a brand's authenticity. This provides justification for the fact that people are inherently motivated and may use co-creation and customization as a mechanism to incorporate authentic brand into their self-concept.

This study also carries significance towards practice. Knowing the results of this study, brand managers would be in a better position to make strategies regarding their brands in relevant product/services. Managers can make better costumer engagement programs like involving them in making the product look like they want it to be, giving them options to change specifications of the products/services as they like and etc.

Aiming to enhance body of knowledge by exploring antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity, study also examined for moderation of need for uniqueness in relationship of antecedents of brand authenticity and itself. Specific objective of the study are: To examine the antecedents of PBA by assuming customization and co-creation engagement

as predictors of PBA. The study also examines the moderating role of need for uniqueness on relationship of co-creation engagement, customization and PBA and psychological outcomes.

Islam prohibits Muslims from spreading WOM which is not verified. Holy Qur'ān says, "*O you who believe! If a fāsiq (evil person) comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done*" [49:6]. This verse suggests that one cannot say anything about anything by merely listening to a new. This verse can be explained in the context of Brand or product that, without verifying a feature or characteristics, one cannot spread Word Of Mouth (WOM).

In this context a consumer who has actively participated in co-creation/ customization of a product should have authentic information or information with proof. "*Say (O Muhammad), Produce your proof if you are truthful*" [2:111]

The Qur'ānic word "*Al-Amānah*" or what can be translated to English as Trust is relevant here. The subject of Trust is important in our daily lives. If people trust one another (consumers and brands) and if they act accordingly, they would live in peace and harmony. If we do not trust one another and not act righteously, we will create a state of anarchy, confusion and disturbance in the society by selling and consuming products that do not satisfy the right needs and wants of society. Qur'ān also says, "*God doth command you to render back your Trusts to those to whom they are due;...*" (4:58). It implies that human beings need to fulfill all obligations to the fellow beings.

The brand that is not authentic that is not true to it-self leads to deception and its consumers would not be in position to benefit for which they have paid. Falsehood has nothing to stand on, and is exposed when confronted by the truth. The Qur'ān says: "*The Truth has come and falsehood vanished. Surely falsehood is ever bound to vanish.*" (17: 81).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Co-Creation

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, 2004) postulate that the market has become a place where active customers request the opportunity to be involved in the value-creation process. Co-creation marks the shifting landscape of consumer-company interactions, and redefines the meaning of value and the process of value creation. Vargo and Lusch (2004) defined co-creation as the dynamic interaction and involvement of customers with their suppliers in every phase of the value-creation process. In general, there are two types of co-creation: co-creation initiated by consumers, such as consumers' participation in knowledge co-creation in blogs (Seraj, 2012), and firm-sponsored co-creation, where co-creation is conducted on behalf of a firm. This research focuses on firm-sponsored co-creation, which is usually conducted to enhance firm innovation. A prevailing method for encouraging co-creation is to establish innovation contests that invite consumers to team up and generate new product ideas (Füller, 2010).

Earlier research shows several key topics in consumers' co-creation concerning the new product development process: consumer level motivators, firm level factors and outcomes

of co-creation (Hoyer et al., 2010). Studies on consumer-level motivators have focused on differing motivators and psychological reasons that drive consumers to participate in co-creation such as increased status, social esteem, self-efficacy (Nambisan & Baron, 2009), recognition (Hennig-Thurau, 2004), altruism (Füller, Hutter, & Fries, 2012), and delayed rewards such as future job offers (Lerner & Tirole, 2002).

The literature on the outcomes of co-creation has mainly focused on the advantages and effectiveness that are brought by a closer fit of co-created product such as increased commercial value (Fang, Palmatier, & Evans, 2008) and psychological ownership, which may increase purchase demand (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010). However, these studies seldom examined brand relationships as an outcome of co-creation. Brand relationship, despite its importance, has seldom been discussed in the contexts of co-creation, innovation and new product development. Our research aims to bridge this vital research gap in co-creation outcome.

PBA

Authenticity or being authentic means "genuine" implying that something is unique and original. Word authenticity has been used in managerial and consumer behavior research in different meanings (Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014). It has been used to refer to sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003). Authenticity has also been used to refer to something as being natural, honest, and simple (Boyle, 2003). Authenticity for consumers is something they evaluate in the products or services.

Since the seminal work of Napoli et al. (2014) the area of PBA is gaining importance in consumer behavior research. Morhart et al. (2015) noted that a definition of PBA acceptable to all is still a question. Beverland (2006) indicated that such brands are assumed by consumers to be made by artists. Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) noted that such brands are natural and are composed of natural ingredients.

On conceptual side, different authors have operationalized the concept of PBA in different ways. Eggers et al. (2013) proposed that PBA as perceived by chief executive officers of small and medium enterprises to be composed of three elements which are brand consistency, brand customer orientation, and brand congruency. Another possible operationalization of the variable has been done by Morhart et al. (2015) who tried to develop a definition of PBA acceptable to all. They have conceptualized PBA from three perspectives: Objectivist perspective; i.e., evaluation of authenticity of brand from "an evidence based reality that can be assessed using verifiable information about the brand, such as labels of origin" (p.7), constructivist perspective; i.e., evaluation of authenticity of brand based on perceptions of consumers regarding abstract impressions, and lastly externalist perspective which evaluates authenticity of brand based on brands ability to be a source of identity for consumer.

Despite the newness of the area, a few studies have examined the antecedents and consequences of PBA. Eggers et al. (2013) studied PBA in relation to brand trust. Using data from CEO's of 285 SMEs from Germany, Eggers et al. (2013) found that brand authenticity significantly relates to brand trust and thus can be helpful in growth of the firm. At the same

time, Similarly, Morhart et al. (2015) studied PBA in relation to emotional brand attachment and WOM and found support for the proposed relations. It thus provides an opportunity to explore more antecedents and consequence of PBA.

Brand co-creation is gaining huge importance in the current world. Co-creation is a type of consumer collaboration where consumer collaborates with producer in production of product (Hsieh & Chang, 2016). Bendapudi and Leone (2003) noted that central idea behind the concept of co-creation is the competitiveness of product.

Co-creation engagement makes people think off as a producer of the product and make the product appear more relevant to the individuals. Individuals would thus translate this positivity associated from relevance of brand with self to the brand and this will lead them to perceive brand as relevant to them and thus authentic. This study thus proposes that:

H1: Brand co-creation engagement has a significant positive impact on PBA.

Customization and PBA

Customization is the answer to the needs of today's costumer (Fiore, Lee, & Kunz, 2004). Customization allows individuals to experience what they want to have; i.e., be unique and tap up their individual need (Lee & Moon, 2015). Customization has usually been seen as mass customization which refers to delivering a product or service which meets individual consumer's need (Tseng, Jiao, & Merchant, 1996). Tseng and Hu (2014) argued that customization is based on the concept of making costumer as co-designer. The concept of co-designer is one in which the customer is able to get access to the design process, such as concept design and product development, by expressing the requirements or even co-designing the product with the configuration toolkit (Tseng & Piller, 2003).

Customization and specifically personalization involves proactive participation by costumers. Product's relevance to the person is enhanced in personalization (Tseng & Hu, 2014). When a consumer himself is involved in making the product, his cognitive patterns would allow him to perceive product as genuine. The product will be perceived as more credible, having high integrity and symbol by the consumer; i.e., customized brand will be perceived as authentic brand. Thus, this study proposes that:

H2: Brand customization has significant positive impact on PBA.

PBA and Brand Trust

Marketing aims at generating bond between brand and costumer (consumer), and brand trust is required to make this bond existent (Hiscock, 2002). Delgado, Munuera, and Yague (2003) defined brand trust as: *"Feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand, that it is based on the perceptions that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer"* (p.11)

Recent past decade has seen fall in trust of consumers towards brands. Researchers have also documented such a decrease in trust towards brand (Gerzema & Lebar, 2008). As such, this downfall in trust was the main reason behind the rise of phenomenon of brand authenticity. Researchers have also started to note this phenomenon that authenticity leads to brand trust (Balmer, 2011; Eggers et al., 2013). Authentic brands are credible, have

integrity and serve as a symbol (Morhart et al., 2015). Credibility and integrity build trust in brand. This means that more a person perceives any brand as authentic the more he/she will trust that brand.

On empirical side, Eggers et al. (2013) examined the relationship between PBA and brand trust. Using data from 285 CEO's of German small and medium sized enterprises and applying SEM, their results showed that perceptions of authenticity of brand positively influenced the feelings of trust towards that brand. Keeping in line with the above discussion, this study proposes that:

H3: PBA has significant positive impact on brand trust.

Brand Trust and WOM

WOM refers to sharing opinion from one consumer to another, and the conclusive stage in the consumer decision that convinces people to use the products or services and enter deep into the target audience. It this implies delivering reliable messages that may change behaviors and attitudes, in offices, homes, schools, on blogs and Social Networking Sites (SNSs), wherever consumers naturally talk (Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donavan, 2002). According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999), WOM has the most positive impact on customer's perceived image, rather than three others, including: professional advice, advertisements, and book/movies/news. Research indicated that 76 percent of all purchase decisions are impacted by WOM. It has been estimated that there are 3.4 billion WOM conversations each day and 2.3 billion of those are about brands (Balter, 2008). Previous researchers attempted to understand the effects of WOM on customer's behaviors.

Consumer can assume that a trusted company is motivated to offer high-quality products. Finally, existing studies show that trust affects relationship commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and customer loyalty (Aydin & Özer, 2005) in a positive way. Thus, if a consumer trusts a corporate brand, he/she is likely to form a positive behavioral intention towards the brand and spread positive WOM. Thus the study proposes that:

H4: Brand Trust has significant positive impact on WOM.

Moderating Role of Consumers' Need for Uniqueness

Tian et al. (2001) noted that the need of consumer to differentiate from the products that others are using lies in the motivation to appear different from others. The need gets stronger when consumer feel any threat to his personal identity (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). More formally, need for uniqueness of consumers can be defined as: "the trait of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's self-image and social image" (Tian et al., 2001).

In a world of 'fake' brands, consumers with high need for uniqueness would require the brand they use to be original. Need for uniqueness by consumers would cause them to be more tilted towards brand they feel are closer i.e., relevant to them. Researchers have also noted that psychological traits are linked with symbolic view of brands. Psychological traits like conformity and need for uniqueness have been associated with symbolic view of brand

(Nunes, 2009; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). Symbolism is also a dimension of PBA (Morhart et al., 2015). This means that consumers' need for uniqueness is actually linked with PBA.

When consumers' unique needs combine with opportunity to fulfill those needs, the combined effect would definitely create more worth of the end product. When making a purchase decision that perceived worth of the brand will come into play and consumer will be more prone to make purchase decision in favor the brand he/she had co-created keeping in view his/her need for uniqueness in that brand. Consumer will take this decision because now he/she will feel that product to be more relevant to him/her, more genuine, more reliable and will see that brand as having better quality. All of these attributes are what is called as PBA according to Morhart et al (2015).

Further, when consumers' need for uniqueness interacts with opportunity to make those needs part of a product, it will cause individual to see the brand as a part of his/her self; because now the consumer sees brand as what he/she wants it to be. They will see it as something which is reflection of them or their needs. They will consider the brand as part of their selves and self-concept. This will lead individual to perceive brand as more authentic. Thus, this study proposes that:

H5a: Consumers' need for uniqueness will moderate the relation between co-creation engagement and PBA in such a way that PBA will be stronger when consumers need for uniqueness will be higher.

H5b: Consumer' need for uniqueness will moderate the relation between customization and PBA in such a way that PBA will be stronger when consumers' need for uniqueness will be higher.
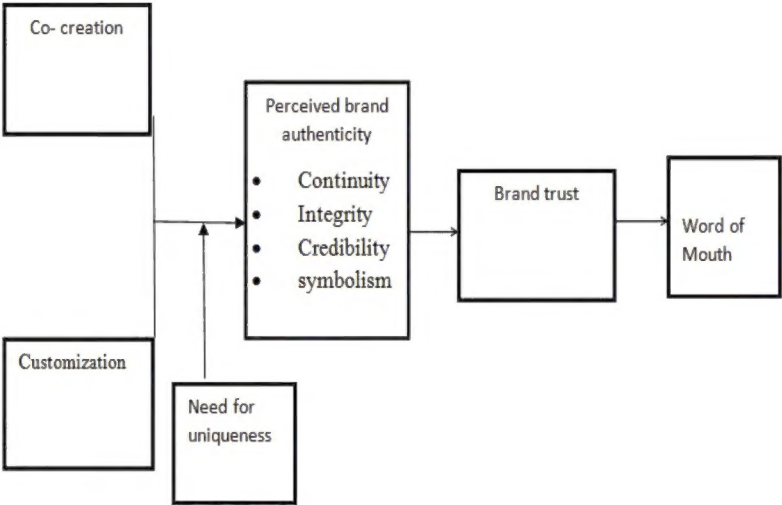
RESEARCH MODEL

FIGURE 1. Research model

Research Design

There are several procedures used for survey as per desire and convenience of researchers like in person interviews, telephone interviews, mailed questionnaire and online question-naires. For any method survey group is targeted as population, size is determined as sample size; sampling techniques are decided and measurement instruments are selected. All these procedures are discussed as following:

Sekaran and Bougie (2016) stated that sampling is the process of selecting the unit from a population of interest for impartially simplification of results of our study. There are many cases where it might not be possible covering the whole population. In this situation, sampling delivers better choice and makes valid results because in a short period of time it covers a research population. A popular form of purposive sampling was deployed to collect data from consumers who participated in co-creation and customization activities. This research used purposive sampling technique and 200 responses were generated. At the general level, current study measured the different constructs from previous studies and responses were given on a 5-point scale. These items, the sources from where the items are adapted are summarized below.

Measures

Brand co-creation engagement was measured by 12 item scale developed by Hsieh and Chang (2016). Hsieh and Chang (2016) developed scale on co-creation engagement using scale of Schaufeli and Salanova (2002). on engagement. Study deployed 39 item scale of Lee and Moon (2015) to measure customization. The scale was originally made for online customization. Scale is adopted with minor modifications. Study used 8-item scale of Del-gado et al. (2003) for Brand Trust. WOM scale was adopted from study of Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron, & Marticotte (2010). Study used 14 item scale of Morhart et al. (2015) and 31 item scale of Tian et al. (2001) for Need for Uniqueness.

Study deployed SEM for analyzing data. In case of multiple IVs and DVs it is better to go for SEM. SEM is a comprehensive approach towards analysis of primary data. Results are easier to interpret and are clear in visual form. SEM allows conducting and combining a vast variety of statistical procedures. In other words, it can be seen as a speedy sports car (Nachtigall, Kroehne, Funke, & Steyer, 2003). Point of concern in SEM is goodness fit of model and direct and indirect effects.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Structural equation modeling is used to analyze data (AMO). Table 1 represents the results of correlation and reliability of measures. Table 3 contains the results of structural equation modeling.

For the overall evaluation of the causal model, multiple model fit indices were analyzed. The model fit indices include chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio, GFI, AGFI, CFI, NFI and RMSEA. Model is a good fit if the values of GFI, AGFI, CFI, and NFI are above or equal to 0.9 and RMSEA is below or equal to 0.8 (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). As per Anderson &

Gerbing (1988), the value of chi-sq/Df should be less than 5. The test statistics of the model provide following results: 2 /df 2.391, GFI 0.930, AGFI 0.911, CFI 0.956, NFI 0.927, and RMSEA 0.044.

TABLE 1
Correlation analysis & reliability of measures

	CC	C	NfU	PBA	BT	WoM
CC	1(.76)					
C	.423**	1(.71)				
NfU	.429**	.465**	1(.70)			
PBA	.505**	.570**	.568**	1(.74)		
BT	.455**	.509**	.497**	.599**	1(.77)	
WoM	.575**	.480**	.539**	.619**	.498**	1(.72)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
n = 200, reliability in parenthesis.

TABLE 2
Standardized Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

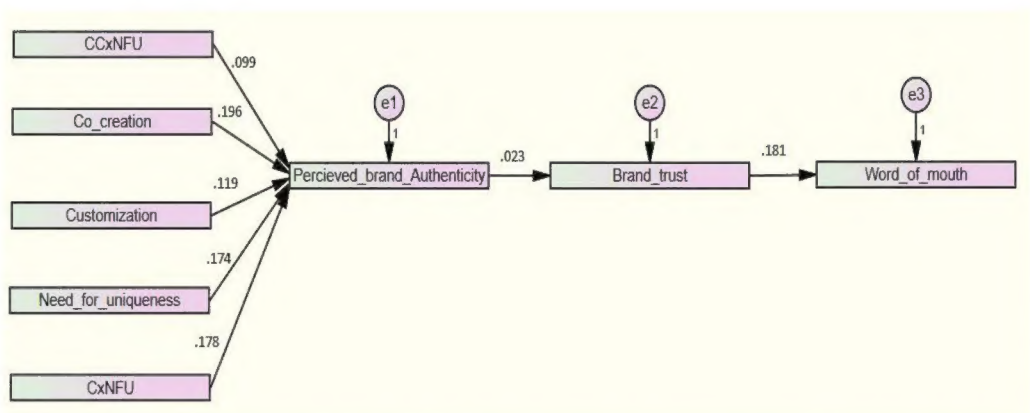|	Hypotheses	Estimates	*p*	Accepted/Rejected
Co-creation	<— PBA	.196	.005	Supported
Customization	<— PBA	.119	.000	Supported
PBA	<— Brand trust	.023	.021	Supported
Brand trust	<—WOM	.181	.000	Supported
CCxNfU	<— PBA	.099	.041	Supported
CxNfU	<— PBA	.178	.013	Supported

FIGURE 2. Standardized Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Hypothesis of the study based upon the literature are supported by the results. When customers are involved in the creation of brand and view brand as more relate-able to them, the brand is perceived as more authentic, and the brands that are authentic are more trustworthy than those which are not. Trustworthiness of brand eventually leads to positive WOM.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, 2004) suggested that the market has become a place where active customers request the opportunity to be involved in the value-creation process which makes the perception of brand as authentic. Also, authentic brands are credible, have integrity and serving as a symbol. Credibility and integrity build trust in brand. This means that more a person perceives brand as authentic, the more he/she will trust that brand (Morhart et al., 2015).

The findings of this research are completely endorsing this fact and supporting the existing body of knowledge which has been used in this research.

From Islamic perspective, results of the study are completely aligned with the teachings of Islam. Islam requires, as stated earlier, that Muslims should not spread news that has no proof. The study suggests that the participants of customization and co-creation process have the proof and evidence to speak for the truth regarding a Brand/product.

Holy Qur'ān says, "Thus have we made of you an *ummah* justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over the nations, and the Apostle a witness over yourselves," (2:143). Islam urges Muslims to be witness over nations and oneself and speak truth whenever asked about it. Importance of truth and authenticity is further depicted in following verses pertaining to the Day of Judgment: "Say: Our Lord will gather us together; then He will judge between us with truth" (34:26).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Some limitations related to the research design need to be acknowledged. First, data was collected at single time. Longitudinal or experimental design may enhance the generalizability of the results. Different product categories have been used across the study. Although these product category have been selected based on the literature, future research on the generalizability of the current results to more products and services in a category would be beneficial.

In addition, future research regarding the long-term consequences of brand authenticity would be interesting. While the study shows that brand authenticity impacts behavioral intentions, it is still questionable whether brand authenticity impacts customer lifetime value, for example, and therefore, builds customer based brand equity. Future research might also consider a comparison of the determinants and consequences of brand authenticity across cultures, as certain antecedents, such as actual self-congruence, are assumed to be weighted differently in different cultures.

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